



INTRODUCTION

THESE essays reflect an interest of long standing in the ways in which intellectual traditions grow: the process by which ideas accumulate and are handed on from one generation to another, changing, developing and acquiring authority as they do so. My years as a teacher of Middle Eastern history at Oxford have given me a special concern with two examples of this process. One of them is the formation in Europe of a certain view of Islam and the culture associated with it: a view derived from an increasing knowledge of what Muslims believe and what they have done in history, and also from changing ideas in Europe about religion and history. The second concern is with the development of the scholarly tradition known loosely as 'orientalism': the elaboration of techniques for identifying, editing and interpreting written texts, and the transmission of them from one generation to another, by a chain – a *silsila*, to give it its Arabic term – of teachers and students.

These two processes have been closely connected with each other: scholars do not work in abstraction, their minds are formed by the culture of their age and previous ages, and they bring to the task of interpreting what they have extracted from their sources principles of selection, emphasis and arrangement derived from the ideas and convictions their lives have taught them.

The first and longest essay in this book attempts to trace the relationship between these two processes: to show the roots of the European tradition of Islamic studies in ideas about God, man, history and society which lie at the heart of European thought. In particular, it tries to show how the study of Islam, when it emerged as a separate discipline in the nineteenth century, was given its direction by certain ideas which were current at the time: ideas about cultural history, the nature and development of

religions, the ways in which holy books should be understood and the relationships between languages. I have tried to trace the two most important chains of Islamic scholarship, those which began in Paris and Leiden in the seventeenth century. By the second half of the nineteenth century Islamic scholarship had developed an organization – methods of teaching, publication and communication – and acquired a self-perpetuating authority which has continued to exist until today.

I have paid special attention to Ignaz Goldziher, because he seems to me to have a central position in the history I am tracing: he was heir to both the great *silsilas*, with a mind moulded by the dominant ideas of his age (and also by his own Jewish tradition). Two of Goldziher's writings in particular, that on the origins and growth of the Hadith (*The Traditions of the Prophet*) and that on the development of Islamic theology and law, have created a kind of orthodoxy which has retained its power until our own time.

I do not myself belong to any of the great *silsilas*. I came to Middle Eastern history by another route, and I taught it at a university which has been rather marginal in the history of Islamic studies on the whole, even though the teaching of Arabic in Oxford goes back to the seventeenth century. I was fortunate, however, to have colleagues trained in the central tradition – among those who have died, I think of H. A. R. Gibb, Richard Walzer, Samuel Stern, Joseph Schacht and Robin Zaehner – and I was at Oxford at a time when attempts were being made to give new strength to 'oriental studies' in Britain, with financial help from the government. The most important figure in this process was H. A. R. Gibb, for as long as he remained in Oxford as Laudian Professor of Arabic. I have written about him at greater length elsewhere,¹ and in the second essay I try to place him in the context of the growth of Islamic studies in Britain. (This essay is also a tribute to one of the first of my graduate students, Jamal Muhammad Ahmed, a gifted writer, and for a time Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Sudan.)

Like all the 'orientalists' of his generation, Gibb was called upon to teach over too wide a range: language, literature and history. He thought of himself as being first of all a historian, and one of the problems of his life in Oxford was that of trying to persuade historians to pay more attention to the history of regions

¹ 'H. A. R. Gibb: the vocation of an orientalist' in *Europe and the Middle East* (London, 1980), pp. 104–34.

lying beyond Europe, and to give it what he thought should be its rightful place in the curriculum of study. Among the reasons for which he finally left Oxford for Harvard was his belief (a well-founded one) that history departments in America would be more receptive to the idea of world history, and that students of good quality whose minds had been formed as historians could be persuaded to devote themselves to the study of the world of Islam.

As a historian, Gibb was concerned both to use the sources in order to discover what had happened in Islamic history (as in his studies of the life of Saladin), and to give a broad interpretation of the development of those societies in which Islam was the dominant religion; his essay, 'An interpretation of Islamic history',² is a seminal work. An American historian, who was not Gibb's student but felt the influence of his ideas, was Marshall Hodgson, whose book *The Venture of Islam* is the subject of my third essay. Every word in the title and subtitle is significant, carefully chosen and deserving of reflection: 'venture', 'Islam', 'conscience', 'history' and 'world society'. I wrote this essay as a review when the book first appeared, and greeted it with enthusiasm as the most important and original attempt to provide the categories through which Islamic history can be understood within the context of the history of the whole Oikoumene, that is to say, the world of settled agriculture, cities and high culture. I still find it a remarkable and exciting book, and should now add to it another work of broad synthesis, the work of one of Gibb's students in his Harvard period: Ira Lapidus's *History of Islamic Societies*.³

It is an underlying assumption of Hodgson's book, and also of Lapidus's, that, within the general history of the Oikoumene, there is such a thing as 'Islamic history': that is to say, there are certain characteristics of structure and development which have been common to societies where Islam has been the dominant religion. Gibb shared this assumption, although none of them would have thought that 'Islam' provided the key to everything which happened in 'Islamic' societies, still less that the history of these societies consists of recurrent cycles of similar phenomena. All three are fully aware that the history of any 'Islamic' society, in a specific time and place, is different from those of others. My

² S. J. Shaw and W. R. Polk, eds., *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (London, 1962), pp. 3-33.

³ (Cambridge, 1988).

own interest as a historian has lain mainly in those countries which lie around the eastern end of the Mediterranean and which can be called, in a loose sense, the Near or Middle East, and mainly in the last two centuries. It has been a matter of concern to me to decide whether, and to what extent, the fact that Islam is the dominant religion of Egypt, Syria or Turkey will help us to understand its history in modern times. I had the opportunity to discuss this question at a conference held at the University of California in Los Angeles in 1979, and the result is the fourth essay; in it I put forward three alternative (or overlapping) principles of explanation, and come to the conclusion that the concept of 'Islamic history' does help us to explain certain aspects of modern Middle Eastern history. There is a clear hint in the conclusion to the essay that I suspected this to be no longer true of the period which began roughly at the end of the First World War: no more than other observers did I anticipate that the 1980s would be a period of what is loosely called 'the resurgence of Islam'.

In this essay and others, however, I show that I was aware of the ground from which the 'resurgence of Islam' would come: the changing consciousness of the 'Other', of that Arabic-speaking, mainly Muslim world, about which European scholars and historians, and I myself among them, have written. There had been a time when it could be treated as a passive body to be dissected, but travel, the experience of imperial rule, and the revolt against it, and the revival of indigenous traditions of thought and writing have made it impossible to think of the 'Orient' in this way. Scholarship is now carried on by some kind of collaboration between those trained in the western tradition and those who, in addition to that training, bring something from their own tradition of Islamic thought and belief. Nobody can now write with meaning about the world of Islam if he does not bring to it some sense of a living relationship with those of whom he writes. The fifth essay considers two men, different in many ways but similar in others, whose lives touched each other for a brief moment, and whose writings are marked by a vivid sense of the need to stretch out across the gulf created by power, enmity, and difference. The idea of being in a false position haunts T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*: when he asks leave to go away after the occupation of Damascus, it is because 'only for me was the event sorrowful and the phrase meaning-

less'.⁴ Louis Massignon too repudiated 'our secular rage to understand, to conquer, to possess'.

The lives and personalities of Lawrence and Massignon have perplexed me for years. *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, read when it was first published for general circulation in 1935, moved me deeply and was perhaps one of those half-recognized forces which gave direction to my own work as a historian; later, for thirteen years I was to look out of my bedroom window onto the bungalow in the garden of his parents' house in Polstead Road where he had lived when young. Massignon I met sometimes, and the memory of his face and conversation has remained in my imagination. I learnt much about him from friends and colleagues, and here too the spirit of place was important; I have had vivid thoughts of him whenever I have gone to the Greek Catholic church in Garden City, Cairo, restored by the care of his friend Mary Kahil. His thoughts about Islam and its relations with Christianity have provided themes for more than one of these essays.

Massignon's work had a profound influence on French scholars of his own and the next generations, and this can be seen in the writings of Jacques Berque, although the system of thought which underlies them is very different. My essay on Berque is both a tribute to a long friendship and an expression of gratitude for what I have learnt from him. Berque's books bear the imprint of the long experience of French rule and settlement in North Africa. Brought up in Algeria, imbibing the Arabic language along with his native French from an early age, with many years of residence and visits as an official and a scholar, Berque has taught us to distinguish the different rhythms of history: that which foreign rulers have tried to impose upon the Arab Muslim countries they have ruled, and that which those peoples have produced from within themselves. The title of one of his books, *Intérieurs du Maghreb*, indicates the dominant intention of his work: he looks beyond the rulers, and beyond the coastal cities of mixed population, to the towns and villages of the inland plateaux and valleys. His writings are also the expression of an act of faith: that, in spite of all that has happened, a human mutation has taken place; a synthesis of Latin and Arabic culture, of the traditions of the two sides of the Mediterranean, has come into existence and will continue to exist.

I have added to these essays three more which look at the

⁴ *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (London, 1935), p. 652.

stirrings in the consciousness of the 'Other', the attempts to find a new voice in the world. The first of them studies the last moment when it is still possible to speak of a self-sufficient world of Islamic culture. Although the political and economic conditions of self-sufficiency were ceasing to exist by the end of the eighteenth century, an educated Muslim could still look out upon the world with confidence in the strength and survival of the cultural tradition which he had received from the *silsila* of his teachers and ancestors.

Half a century later, this was no longer true. The expansion of European trade, military power and political influence led to attempts, first by indigenous and then by foreign rulers, to introduce new methods of administration, new legal codes and schools of a new kind. Knowledge of French and other European languages, and of the world which they opened, brought new questions and ideas. These stirrings of the mind took place above all in the ports and other cities where men and women of different religions and nationalities lived side by side, and where the traffic of ideas as well as goods could most easily and profitably take place. One of the most important of these cities was Beirut. In the last two essays, I write of two members of the Bustani family, Lebanese Christians whose minds were formed in Beirut and who played an important part in the attempt to understand the new world: Butrus, who edited the first Arabic encyclopaedia and helped to develop the modern style of clear expository Arabic prose; and Sulaiman, who extended the frontiers of Arabic poetic sensibility by translating the *Iliad* of Homer. Both these essays are tributes to friends. The first was written for a volume of essays in honour of Jacques Berque, and the second for a volume in memory of Malcolm Kerr, assassinated in 1984 in Beirut, where he was President of the American University: he was a friend of long standing, and it was he who had invited me to the conference at Los Angeles from which the fourth of these essays grew.

I



ISLAM IN EUROPEAN THOUGHT

I

FROM the time it first appeared, the religion of Islam was a problem for Christian Europe. Those who believed in it were the enemy on the frontier. In the seventh and eighth centuries armies fighting in the name of the first Muslim empire, the Caliphate, expanded into the heart of the Christian world. They occupied provinces of the Byzantine empire in Syria, the Holy Land and Egypt, and spread westwards into North Africa, Spain and Sicily; and the conquest was not only a military one, it was followed in course of time by conversions to Islam on a large scale. Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries there was a Christian counter attack, successful for a time in the Holy Land, where a Latin kingdom of Jerusalem was created, and more permanently in Spain. The last Muslim kingdom in Spain was brought to an end in 1492, but by that time there was a further Muslim expansion elsewhere, by dynasties drawn from the Turkish peoples: the Saljuqs advanced into Anatolia, and later the Ottomans extinguished what was left of the Byzantine empire and occupied its capital, Constantinople, and expanded into eastern and central Europe. As late as the seventeenth century they were able to occupy the island of Crete and to threaten Vienna.

The relationship between Muslims and European Christians, however, was not simply one of holy war, of crusade and *jihad*. There was trade across the Mediterranean, and the balance of it changed in course of time; from the eleventh and twelfth centuries onwards the Italian ports expanded their trade, and, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, ships from the ports of northern Europe began to appear in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. There was also an exchange of ideas, and here the traffic

moved mainly from the lands of Islam to those of Christendom: Arabic works of philosophy, science and medicine were translated into Latin, and until the sixteenth century the writings of the great medical scientist Ibn Sina were used in European medical schools.

Separated by conflict but held together by ties of different kinds, Christians and Muslims presented a religious and intellectual challenge to each other. What could each religion make of the claims of the other? For Muslim thinkers, the status of Christianity was clear. Jesus was one of the line of authentic prophets which had culminated in Muhammad, the 'Seal of the Prophets', and his authentic message was essentially the same as that of Muhammad. Christians had misunderstood their faith, however: they thought of their prophet as a god, and believed he had been crucified. The usual Muslim explanation for this was that they had 'corrupted' their scriptures, either by tampering with the text, or by misunderstanding its meaning. Properly understood, Muslim thinkers maintained, the Christian scriptures did not support Christian claims that Jesus was divine, and a passage of the Qur'an made clear that he had not been crucified but had somehow been taken up into heaven. Again, Christians did not accept the authenticity of the revelation given to Muhammad, but a proper interpretation of the Bible would show that it had foretold the coming of Muhammad.

For Christians, the matter was more difficult. They knew that Muslims believed in one God, who might be regarded, in His nature and operations, as being the God whom Christians worshipped, but they could not easily accept that Muhammad was an authentic prophet. The event to which Old Testament prophecy had pointed, the coming of Christ, had already taken place; what need was there for further prophets? The teaching of Muhammad, moreover, was a denial of the central doctrines of Christianity: the Incarnation and Crucifixion, and therefore also the Trinity and the Atonement. Could the Qur'an be regarded in any sense as the word of God? To the few Christians who knew anything about it, the Qur'an seemed to contain distorted echoes of biblical stories and themes.

With few exceptions, Christians in Europe who thought about Islam, during the first thousand or so years of the confrontation, did so in a state of ignorance. The Qur'an was indeed available in Latin translation from the twelfth century onwards; the first

translation was made under the direction of Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny. Some Arabic philosophical works were well known in translation, those which carried on the tradition of Greek thought. There was very limited knowledge, however, of those works of theology, law and spirituality in which what had been given in the Qur'an was articulated into a system of thought and practice. There were a few exceptions: in the thirteenth century, some of the Dominican houses in Spain were centres of Islamic studies, but even these declined in later centuries. On the Muslim side, rather more was known, and indeed had to be known. Christians continued to live in some Muslim countries, and particularly in Spain, Egypt and Syria, and many of them lived through the medium of the Arabic language. Knowledge of what they believed and practised was therefore available, and it was necessary for administrative and political purposes. The extent of the knowledge should not be exaggerated, however: its limits are shown in such works as al-Ghazali's refutation of the doctrine of the divinity of Christ.¹

Looking at Islam with a mixture of fear, bewilderment and uneasy recognition of a kind of spiritual kinship, Christians could see it in more than one light. Occasionally the spiritual kinship was acknowledged. There is extant, for example, a letter written by Pope Gregory VII to a Muslim prince in Algeria, al-Nasir, in 1076. In it he says:

there is a charity which we owe to each other more than to other peoples, because we recognize and confess one sole God, although in different ways, and we praise and worship Him every day as creator and ruler of the world.²

There has been some discussion of this letter among scholars, and it seems that its significance should not be overstated. It has been suggested that there were practical reasons for the warm and friendly tone in which Gregory wrote: the need to protect the shrinking Christian communities of North Africa, the common opposition of the Papacy and al-Nasir to another Muslim ruler in North Africa, and perhaps the desire of merchants in Rome to have a share in the growing trade of the port of Bougie (Bijaya), in al-Nasir's domains. In other letters, written to Christians, Gregory wrote of Muslims and Islam in harsher ways. Nevertheless, the terms in which the letter is written show that there was

¹ *al-Radd al-jamil li ilahiyat 'Isa bi sarih al-injil*, ed. and trans. R. Chidiac, *Réfutation excellente de la divinité de Jesus-Christ d'après les Evangiles* (Paris, 1969).

² Text in J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina*, vol. CXLVIII (Paris, 1853), pp. 450–2.

some awareness at the time that Muslims were not pagans, and this is the more surprising because it was written just before the beginning of the greatest episode of hostility, the Crusades.³

A more commonly held view was that which saw Islam as an offshoot or heresy of Christianity. This was the view of the first Christian theologian to consider it seriously, St John of Damascus (c. 675–749). He had himself been an official in the administration of the Umayyad caliph in Damascus, and knew Arabic. He includes Islam in a section of his work on Christian heresies: it believes in God, but denies certain of the essential truths of Christianity, and because of this denial even the truths which it accepts are devoid of meaning. The most widely held belief, however, was that which lay at the other end of the spectrum: Islam is a false religion, Allah is not God, Muhammad was not a prophet; Islam was invented by men whose motives and character were to be deplored, and propagated by the sword.⁴

2

Whatever European Christians thought of Islam, they could not deny that it was an important factor in human history, and one which needed to be explained. Awareness of the world of Islam increased in early modern times, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, and in some ways its nature changed. The military challenge from the Ottoman empire had ceased to exist by the eighteenth century, as the balance of military strength shifted. Improvements in navigation made possible the exploration of the world by European ships and an expansion of European trade in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, and there were the beginnings of European settlement. To the Italian trading communities, which had long existed in the ports of the eastern Mediterranean, there were added others: Aleppo, one of the main centres of Near Eastern trade, had several communities,

³ Discussion in R. Lopez, 'Le facteur économique dans la politique africaine des Papes', *Revue historique*, 198 (1947), pp. 178–88; C. Courtois, 'Grégoire VII et l'Afrique du nord', *Revue historique*, 195 (1945), pp. 97–122, 193–226; J. Henninger, 'Sur la contribution des missionnaires à la connaissance de l'islam, surtout pendant le moyen âge', *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*, 9 (1953), pp. 161–85; B. Z. Keder, *European Approaches towards the Muslims* (Princeton, N. J. 1984), pp. 56–7. I owe my understanding of this episode to the kindness of Dr David Abulafia.

⁴ St John of Damascus, 'De Haeresibus' in Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. XCIV (Paris, 1860), pp. 764–74; English trans., D. J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam* (Leiden, 1972), pp. 132–41.